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Coming of Age? Overview of Career Guidance Policy and Practice in Australia.

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Abstract.

In recent years significant international focus has highlighted the critical importance of managing life, learning and work in a constantly changing labour market. This changing world and the corresponding need for individuals to engage in repeated decision-making about learning and work has raised the importance of and necessity for the provision of career development services across the lifespan. This challenge is being addressed by many countries across the globe. Within this context, this paper discusses the initiatives enhancing the status of career service provision in Australia.

Contextual background

This paper will provide a very brief overview of some relevant demographic factors in the Australian context. It will then provide a brief history of career development service provision in Australia before presenting a discussion of key initiatives of recent years. With the support of the Commonwealth and State governments, and in partnership with the international career community, the Australian career community has engaged in considerable activity to significantly increase all aspects of service provision, including a focus on training and accreditation of practitioners.

The Commonwealth of Australia comprises six states and two internal territories – Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia, and the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. The system of government is a parliamentary democracy and there are three levels of government: Federal, State/Territory, and Local. There are almost 20 million people in Australia, most of whom live in the major coastal cities and regional centres. In 2001, 8 in 10 Australians lived within 50 kilometres of the coast, 66.3% lived in major cities, 31.1% in inner and outer regional areas, and 2.6% in remote and very remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS, 2002). The indigenous population at 30 June 2001 was 458,500, with the largest proportion of indigenous peoples living in the Northern territory (28.8%) (ABS, 2002). English is the official language of Australia, although one in four Australians was either born in a non-English speaking country or has at least one parent from such a country. At least 17 percent of the population speaks a language other than English at home.

Significant national attention has focused on school retention in Australia in recent years. In May 2003, 70 percent of 15-19 year olds were in full-time education, either at school, TAFE or university (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, DSF, 2003); 85 percent were in full-time study or full-time work. The resulting percentage of young people not in full-time education or full-time work (15 percent) generally has been consistent for at least a decade (DSF, 2003). However only 55 percent of Indigenous young people are in full-time education or full-time work. The educational and labour force participation for people born overseas is also less than that for people born in Australia. In addition, there is a documented relationship between educational qualifications and labour force status. The proportion of unemployed non-students without a completed upper secondary education

was as high as 16 percent in 2001 compared with 7.3 percent for secondary school completers. For university graduates the rate was 1.7 percent (DSF, 2003). In terms of Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) comparisons, Australia ranks 18 out of 30 in terms of males with a completed upper secondary education and 21 out of 30 for females.

Definitions of career guidance in Australia

It is important to begin with a description of the terms that will be used. Career development work, also known as career guidance, is a term applied across a spectrum of career related processes which include the provision of information, counselling, curriculum and program interventions such as career education, structured experiences such as work experience, and coordination of events such as career markets. Career development work has traditionally been conducted by a range of professionals, including teachers, counsellors, and career advisers, all who have variously been termed career development practitioners or career coordinators (National Board of Employment, Education and Training, NBEET, 1992). The more recent focus on the individual's own role in their career development and the lifelong nature of this role has led to the linking of career development with lifelong learning. Thus career development learning or career development facilitation may be the term for the 21st century to describe this process, and the practitioner becomes a career development facilitator (Patton & McMahon, 1999), one who facilitates the individual's own construction of his/her career.

Systemic structure of career guidance provision

The structure of government in Australia, what could be described as a federated and devolved system, largely determines the structure of the career guidance system. Many of the main services remain located in schools, and while school education is administered under the federal government, primary responsibility lies with state and territory governments. Services are also located in colleges of technical and further education and in universities. Since 1995, employment services, previously government run, have largely been contracted to private sector organisations. The federal government maintains a role in providing leadership in areas of national priority, and extensively contracts out services in national career programs. Many career guidance services for people in transition are also largely privatised as companies vie for tender opportunities with specific projects. Nationally, career guidance services are coordinated through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) that brings together government ministers responsible for these portfolios from across the country and New Zealand. The National Careers Taskforce, a group that reports to MCEETYA, is responsible for the oversight of most policy and practice.

Career guidance services across the lifespan

Activity for young people in schools

Responsibility for career guidance in schools rests with the states and this has resulted in different structures in both the provision of counselling services and in the provision of career education. For example in Queensland guidance officers, often with a ratio of 1:1200 students (McCowan, McKenzie, Medford, & Smith, 2001) attempt to work across the areas of educational, career and personal counselling. In New South Wales and Victoria, schools have allocation for careers

advisers, however in Victoria often these are not full time work allocations (Harrison, 1999; OECD, 2004).

Similarly, the provision of developmental curriculum based career education varies across states and across schools, both in terms of the nature and extent of provision, and in the type of provision. While the beginnings of traditional vocational guidance in Australia have been identified as early as the 1920s (Morgan & Hart, 1977), the acknowledgment of the need for a broader and more consolidated program basis to career services in schools was not evident until the first national career education conference in 1977 (Hart & Morgan, 1977).

In 1977, Morgan and Hart (1977) commented on the “ad-hoc experimentation” (p.6) in relation to career education in the sixties and seventies; reviews of career education practices across the states in 1996 (Shears, 1996) and again in 2004 (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2004) support the contention that little has changed. In most cases, provision of career education is not mandatory and individual schools decide on level and type, if any, of provision. What exists can be represented along a continuum, ranging from a developmental curriculum from pre-school to year 12 through to the existence of one or more individuals who incorporate career counselling and perhaps the maintenance of a career information system into their role. Between these points career activities may include components in related teaching and learning activities, guest speakers, career expos, and experiential activities such as work placement and work experience placed within formal career programs.

Despite a period of curriculum activity during the early 1980s (which in Queensland led to the development of Curriculum Guidelines for Career Education for Years 8-10, Queensland Education Department, 1984), and major national reports emphasising the need to raise the profile of career education (Australian Education Council Review Committee, 1991; Australian Education Council, 1992), criticism of the provision of career education has been evident for many years, with McCowan and McKenzie (1994) commenting that “In real terms, despite intense interest in it, career education has received scant attention in the major curriculum reforms across Australia” (p. vi). These comments have been repeated in many national overviews and in the reports of the Prime Minister’s Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001), and the OECD Review conducted in 2002. Most recently a government report into vocational education in schools, *Learning to work* (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2004) was critical of the lack of progress in career guidance provision despite earlier similar reports and was emphatic about the recommendations it made in relation to the provision of career guidance services in schools. In particular, it recommended that:

- Career education be a mandatory part of the core curriculum of the compulsory years of secondary schooling, clearly defined and distinct from VET programs;
- All secondary schools have at least one full-time professional career advisor, with appropriate specialist training, who can provide a dedicated career service;
- The professional development needs of career educators be better met through appropriate training and resources for professional development; and
- A clear set of national standards for the delivery of career education in schools be adopted.

The post school context

In the post school context, the provision of career guidance is even more limited, with the report of the OECD Review of Career Guidance Policies conducted in 2002 commenting on the “uneven” (p. 17) access for young people to career education programs and school to work transition programs. Many non-government organisations contracted to perform employment services do not provide

career guidance. While a number of programs offered to young people in transition (e.g., Jobs Pathways Program – a job search help program for students at risk of leaving school early, Career Counselling Program- for long-term unemployed young people) have had positive outcomes, provision in technical and further education colleges (TAFE) is particularly limited and is varied across the states. The 2002 OECD review report cited evidence that TAFE students report lower satisfaction with career and counselling support services than with other aspects of their TAFE experience. A similar picture is evident with universities, all autonomous institutions, offering varying levels of career development support.

The OECD Review (2002) also commented on services for adults, concluding that “the guidance services available to adults in Australia are patchy and limited” (p. 14), a view echoed throughout the nineties (Patton, 1999). Where they have existed they have been predominantly located in public employment services and have focused on returning unemployed people to employment. Recommendations emanating from the OECD review supported the need for “a strategy to make face-to-face guidance services available on an inclusive and lifelong basis” (p. 21), with employers, TAFE, adult and community education, and Career Information Centres being encouraged to enhance services.

Overall, while policy reports have emphasised the need for a comprehensive career guidance service to be available for all Australians, a decline in real support for career education occurred (McCowan & Hyndman, 1998; Patton, 2002), and career personnel in schools having their time devoted to careers work reduced (Harrison, 1999). While a review of six countries (France, Germany, New Zealand, Canada, the United States and Great Britain) conducted by McCowan and Hyndman (1998) revealed career work increasing in national importance, until recently Australia remained “conspicuous for its lack of focus on career activity as a major national priority” (p. 39). Unlike other countries, there is no formalised government or statutory authority or system that exists to oversee the provision of career guidance services to the population. Indeed the Report of the OECD Review of Career Guidance Policies (2002) commented that the efforts in schools to strengthen vocational elements of the curriculum may have paradoxically led to neglect in career guidance provision, a perspective echoed in other reports (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2004; Patton, 2001).

Recent significant national activity

This brief background of the status of career service provision across the lifespan in Australia highlights the issues, which have emanated from the structure of government, such as a disparate approach to the field and resulting differences in nature and extent of activity. Such a disjointed structure and approach demands nationally sponsored and coordinated activity. Recognition of these issues and of the importance of career development services has seen significant national activity in recent years. This work has been driven by key policy documents, each of which reflects the national commitment to career guidance provision for young people. These documents include:

- The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century (MCEETYA, 1999),
- Footprints to the Future, the Report of the Prime Minister’s Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (2001), and
- the Stepping Forward agreement (MCEETYA, 2002a), a signed statement by all State and Federal employment, education and training ministers committing to improving pathways for all young people.

In a bid to build on international best practice, key initiatives have developed Australian versions of international projects though newly strengthening international partnerships. For example, following the writing of a background paper (McMahon, Patton, & Tatham, 2003), the Australian Blueprint for Career Development (ABCD; Miles Morgan, 2003) was developed, adapted from the Canadian Blueprint for Life/Work Designs (Hache, Redekopp & Jarvis, 2000), and the National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (1996) guidelines developed in the United States. Similarly the Australian version of The Real Game was developed following consultation with its international developers. Other significant national developments have included the National Career Information Service (NCIS) *myfuture* website, the development of the Employability Skills Framework, the focus on organisational best practice for VET in schools, the Career and Transition Services Framework, and improving services in vocational educational and training (VET) and career guidance for Indigenous students. More recently, the Commonwealth government has introduced the following:

- A new scholarship scheme to reward Australia's outstanding career teachers;
- Career forums for school principals and career advisers;
- Infrastructure for a national career telephone help service;
- Initiatives to support local community partnerships in the provision of career guidance; and
- A parental kit to be included in the Job Guide, a booklet on career options delivered to all Year 10 students across Australia.

These varied initiatives reflect a comprehensive and coordinated approach to enhance career service provision which targets a range of people involved in career development, including parents and the community as well as formal institutional providers. It is this national strategic coordination of career guidance services which is emphasised in the OECD (2004) review as an important strategy for all countries to adopt.

The provision and support of training and recognition of professional standards

In recent years there has been a growth in the number of career professionals in the private sector in Australia, as the profession has moved from its traditional location in secondary schools to a target population which includes people from all ages and career development stages. A consequence has been the larger numbers of people from a wide range of professions who do not have specific training in career development engaging in the provision of career guidance services. The dearth of training provision for career development practitioners in Australia has been well documented (McCowan & McKenzie, 1997; NBEET, 1992; Patton, 2002), and was highlighted in the OECD review Report in 2002. This report concluded that "too often, qualifications from apparently related fields seem to be regarded as proxies for guidance qualifications without any verification of whether they assure the requisite competencies or not. This risks undermining the field's credibility in the eyes of fellow professionals and the general public" (OECD, 2002, p. 22). Australia is not alone in this acknowledgement with the 2004 report of the OECD investigation into fourteen countries focusing on the need to develop training and professional standards for career development practitioners.

In Australia the lack of consistency in national training in career development led to the development of the National Training Framework in 1992 by the then national body, the National Board of Employment, Education and Training. The breadth of the career coordinator role was acknowledged in the six general units of competence identified in this framework: Professional Knowledge and Practice which underpins and overlaps all other units; Career Education and Career Guidance; Counselling and Career Counselling; Curriculum and Program Design (knowledge and

skills for practitioners to design, deliver and evaluate curriculum based career programs); Organisation, Management and Consultation; and Information and Resources. Appropriate training also needs to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the key theories underpinning career development practice, as well as an understanding of strategies to deliver career guidance services to a wide and diverse range of individuals in diverse settings. However there has been no systematic development of the framework over the last decade, although training programs in existence have often used it as a guide in their development. Currently only a small number of tertiary institutions have developed programs designed to specifically prepare career practitioners (four in Australia, see McCowan et al, 2001). In addition a number of private colleges offer courses in career counselling.

In 2004 the Department of Education Science and Training has supported the development of *Australian Career Development Studies (ACDS)*, a nationally consistent articulated set of programs for career practitioners and others involved in supporting career development. ACDS is a series of three programs targeted to different levels of career practitioner needs. These are:

- *Awareness of Career Development*: introductory and targeted for those wishing to learn the basics of career development (no formal qualifications required);
- *Elements of Career Service Delivery*: three accreditable units at Certificate IV level of the Australian Qualifications Framework; and
- *Career Development Services*: an accreditable unit consisting of four separate modules, including an assessment module, at postgraduate certificate level.

Each of the programs will be provided on line and are to be publicly available in 2005.

Complementing the formal training is the work of a very active professional association scene. Each state in Australia has a specific association which focuses on career education or career counselling. In addition, the Australian Association of Career Counsellors is actively engaged in the development of professional standard guidelines and the provision of professional development opportunities nationally and through its State branches. As career professionals are engaged across many sectors, including education, employment services, government departments and private companies, vocational education and training, and private practice, a new alliance of eleven career-related associations, the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA), recognised as the peak body of the career industry, was begun in 2000 to act as a national representative body of career practitioner organisations.

Along with adequate and appropriate training, there is a recognised need for a national quality standards framework to guide and monitor the standards of those working within the industry, with the MCEETYA Taskforce emphasising the need for “quality standards and quality assurance mechanisms...across the full range of career guidance services” (MCEETYA, 2002b, p. iii). Initiatives to this end were conducted in 2004 with a review of competencies and standards documents of other associations (e.g., International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance, 1995; and the (Canadian) National Steering Committee for Career Development Guidelines and Standards, 2004) resulting in a scoping paper outlining quality standards for Australian career practitioners (CICA, 2004). Consultation on these standards and accreditation processes continues across the industry.

Summary and conclusion

It is evident that there is a range of services in Australia which support the career development activities of individuals across the lifespan. However, overall they remain fragmented, and supportive of spasmodic career transition, rather than preparing a generation of Australians who are all prepared to engage in ongoing self-managed decision-making about their learning and work. As

the OECD Review (2002) concluded, “while important pieces of career information and guidance provision in support of lifelong learning are in place, other pieces are missing, and an overall lifelong strategy has not yet been clearly articulated’ (p. 25). While national developments such as the ABCD and NCIS have a lifespan focus, the structures to support and facilitate their use are almost non-existent for adults in transition. Considerable work is still needed here.

In summing this review of career guidance provision in Australia, it is evident that the nation is at a crossroads. Recent reviews have highlighted work which needs to be done. International impetus stimulated through the series of OECD country visits and subsequent reports has prompted significant national activity undertaken with Commonwealth and State cooperation, crucial to a “national quality approach” (MCEETYA, 2002b, p. iv) to a framework of career and transition services in Australia. The recently published report of the OECD review of 14 countries (*Career guidance and public policy: Bridging the gap*, 2004) shows Australia is not alone in the challenges which face nations in the provision of career guidance. It is important to explore appropriate ways to widen the access of all individuals across the lifespan to career guidance services, and of course to appropriately resource and train career practitioners to deliver these services. In addition to the national initiatives already discussed, evidence of best practice across the country abounds with programs for unemployed individuals, public sector organizations, representatives of a building workers’ union, and a program which facilitates the career development needs of pre-retirees (see Patton & McMahon, 2002; and McMahon & Patton, 2003, for these and other examples). The *Australian Journal of Career Development* also continues to maintain a significant presence in the international literature.

There are a number of points worth noting in relation to the recent activity in Australia. First is the important establishment of international partnerships in relation to specific initiatives, and in relation to the strength that can be derived from working together. Second is the recognition of and support for the national body, CICA. Third is the alliance between the Commonwealth and State governments in the funding and support for the various initiatives and the resulting national focus. Finally, and not least, is the nationally coordinated and strategic nature of the initiatives in career service provision, which include a national curriculum blueprint, information provision and support through a national career information system, professional development at three levels, professional accreditation processes, and support for a wide range of people and organisations involved in career service provision. All career development professionals in Australia are rightly hopeful that such recognised support and integrated activity at a national level is the beginning of the coming of age of the career development industry in this country.

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